

The Mechoui or Traditional Style Eating

Hospitality is most evident at mealtime. If you happen to be in a Mauritanian home at mealtime or near where people are eating, they will always say “*Wahay Awkel*” (come and eat). The most common way for people to eat is from a communal platter with the hands while sitting on the floor. If a visitor does not join the group, he or she should leave the eating area and wait until they are through. It is considered impolite to watch people eat.

Before entering the room, it is polite to take shoes off and avoid stepping on a mat. It is a good idea to have shoes that are easy to slip on and off. The host normally enters the room before the guests, making it easy to tell where to leave the shoes.

Cold beverages are first served to the visitor. They are usually a selection of juices, sodas and bottled water. During *Lekhriv* or time of milk, fresh camels milk flavored with grilled Arabic Gum is served before the other beverages. Zrig a watered down and sweetened milk, may also be served in a large bowl. Note, a very hospitable host will refill your bowl if you empty it all the way. Tea may be served before meals especial if it the “meal” is also an official meeting.

Moslems only eat with the right hand. According to Islamic ritual, the left hand is used for toilet purposes. Pulling meat off a bone with only one hand is tricky and sometimes requires teamwork. A foreigner may be offered a spoon and indeed some Mauritians also prefer a spoon. Knives are common. Sometimes small, individual plates are provided to place food items from the communal platter. Fortunately, a bowl with soap and water is passed around to wash hands before eating.

If a woman is not wearing a long or modest skirt, she may be offered a wrap to cover herself. It is a good idea to accept the wrap because it makes sitting much less awkward.

The eating arrangements vary between villages and within families. For example, women may eat separate from men and children may eat separate from adults. On official visits, female officials eat with male officials. It is pretty easy to tell where to sit because a tablecloth is placed on the floor. Most of the times, napkins are provided.

When in season, a large platter of dates will be served as appetizers. Seeds are placed directly on the tablecloth. The first dish is usually grilled meat (mutton or goat). The communal platter is invisibly divided with each person’s portion directly in front of him. No one takes food from someone else’s space. The hosts will toss choice bits of meat to the guest’s part of the platter. Some foreigners are timid about ripping or cutting off hunks of meat and are grateful for the assistance. The second dish is rice (lunch) or couscous (dinner) with boiled meat placed on top. Mauritians usually take a handful rice/couscous, a bit of meat, push it up the side of the platter, roll it into a ball in their hand, and pop it into their mouths. If available in the local market, canned vegetables, chicken or a simple salad is also served. The time between the first dish and the second may be a few minutes or over an hour. If provided, dessert is usually fresh fruit. To indicate completion of a meal, a person sets back from the tablecloth. At that time, any food left in his “slice” is fair game for others. A bowl of water and soap is passed to wash

the hands at the end of the meal. It is a good idea to wipe ones hands on a napkin before washing.

After or towards the end of the meal, the guest may be served the first of three glasses of a mint and green tea mixture. The first glass is very strong and a little bitter, the second is sweeter and the third is very sweet. Mauritians say that the first glass of tea is bitter like life, the second is sweet like marriage, and the third is very sweet like the birth of the first child. It is a very refreshing and delicious ending to a copious meal. This has been the favored drink of nomadic desert caravans for centuries. Mauritians are not offended if a foreign guest refuses tea.

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